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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000150

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NSC FOR MARIA GERMANO

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: PM SARGSIAN DECLARED WINNER OF PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION; OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATION REACHES 50,000

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JOSEPH PENNINGTON, REASONS 1.5(B,D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Armenia's Central Election Commission announced preliminary results from yesterday's presidential election showing PM Sargsian as the winner with 52.8 percent of the vote. The PM's margin ensures that he will (barely) escape a runoff with second-place finisher and former president Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP). LTP's supporters immediately claimed that the results had been falsified and called for a mass protest rally in central Yerevan. As of 2000 local time, an estimated 50,000 protesters had converged on Opera Square in what has been up to now a peaceful protest. The protesters later dispersed peacefully, but plan to continue where they left off tomorrow afternoon. The OSCE/ODIHR Observer Mission issued a statement this afternoon characterizing the election as "mostly in line with international standards" despite significant problems in vote counting at 15 percent of polling stations in which observers were present. The authorities have thus far exercised restraint by not interfering with the demonstrations. Nevertheless, the possibility for civil unrest and violence cannot be ruled out in coming days. End Summary.

SARGSIAN SQUEAKS THROUGH IN FIRST ROUND

12. (U) According to preliminary results released by the Central Election Commission (CEC) this afternoon, PM Sargsian escaped a contentious runoff with second-place finisher Levon Ter-Petrossian by a margin of roughly 45,000 votes. According to the CEC, LTP received 21.5 percent of the vote, while Orinats Yerkir leader Artur Baghdassarian finished third with 16.7 percent. The opposition wasted no time in asserting that the election had essentially been stolen, and calling on supporters to take to the streets to "defend their votes." A crowd of several thousand had gathered by midday in front of the Matenadaran (Manuscript Museum). By the time LTP arrived to address the crowd at 1600 local time, the numbers had swelled to perhaps 30,000. LTP then led the demonstrators on a march through central Yerevan and ultimately to Freedom Square, next to the Yerevan Opera. As of 2000 this evening, we estimate that the number of protesters had reached about 50,000. At 2030, the rally dispersed peacefully, but LTP has called on supporters to

reconvene at the same place on Thursday afternoon.

13. (U) The Armenian authorities have exercised restraint in responding to the demonstrations. Although we have seen a noticeable increase in police presence in the city center, especially near the CEC building, police have made no attempt to interfere in the demonstrations or disperse the crowd. A group supporting PM Sargsian had initially planned a celebratory rally for a square near where the protesters had gathered, but by mid-afternoon the organizers had (wisely) called it off.

OBSERVER MISSION ISSUES REPORT

14. (C) Late this afternoon, the International Election Observation Mission in Armenia (OSCE/ODIHR, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament) issued its preliminary report, describing the election as "mostly in line with the country's international commitments and standards." Although there was scant mention of the more problematic aspects of yesterday's voting at the press conference announcing the report, the body of the text outlines a series of concerns. Most damningly, ODIHR characterizes the vote counting process at 15 percent of the precincts observed as either "bad" or "very bad." (Comment: Post has received many reports -- some more credible than others -- about alleged ballot stuffing, intimidation of opposition supporters at polling stations, and vote count irregularities. The ODIHR assessment of problems in the counting process reinforces our concerns that significant fraud may have taken place, especially in LTP strongholds in

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and around Yerevan. It remains unclear whether the most significant problems were confined to a relatively few districts, or were sufficiently widespread to have changed the outcome. End Comment.)

POST CONVENES EAC

15. (C) In light of the continuing demonstrations and the potential for clashes in the city center, post convened an Emergency Action Committee meeting (septel) this afternoon to assess risks to mission personnel, family members, and the wider Amcit community. The EAC agreed to recommend closure of the international school for a second consecutive day, and an update to recently-issued warden notices regarding the possibility of large political gatherings for the next few days, which has been disseminated.

THE COMING DAYS -- WHAT WE EXPECT

16. (C) Given the level of frustration among opposition supporters and widespread allegations of election-day shenanigans, we expect some level of protests to continue for at least the next several days. We are encouraged by the fact that clashes have so far been avoided, and note that LTP's rhetoric to his followers this afternoon was more calming than inflammatory. Whether the opposition will be able to motivate its supporters to take part in a longer-term protest movement remains an open question. While some of the firebrands in LTP's inner circle may be pushing for a more confrontational approach, we are cautiously hopeful that the worst can be avoided. Nevertheless, the situation remains fluid, and significant civil unrest or violence cannot be ruled out.
PENNINGTON